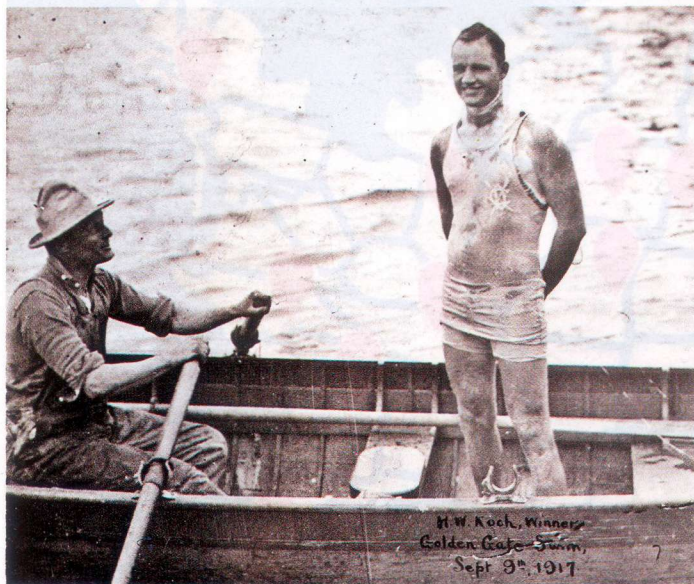


Celebrating 100 Golden Years

The Dolphin Club's annual Joe Bruno Golden Gate Swim turns 100 on Sept. 16



In 1917, swimmer Henry "Doc" Kock (standing) won the Dolphin Club's first Golden Gate Swim in 26:51 with the support of fellow Dolphin Club member and rower Alex Pape.

Courtesy of Dolphin Swimming & Boating Club

Between early 1848 and December 1849, the population of San Francisco skyrocketed from about 400 people to more than 25,000. Most were lured by the clarion call of the Gold Rush, and the massive influx of prospectors and their hangers-on established the once wild western outpost as not just a thriving town, but also a destination for dreamers, adventurers, and those in search of fortune, if not fame.

However, once they'd arrived in the foggy, temperate hills of Northern California, all those people needed to find a way to play when they weren't panning for gold or otherwise occupied in the new city. In 1877, the Dolphin Club started as a small men's swimming and rowing club of just 25 souls who frolicked in and around the chilly waters of San Francisco Bay.

Before long, club members moved from casual dipping and bathing to swimming longer and longer distances, and the Golden Gate, the narrow, mile-wide chasm that separates San Francisco and Marin County, beckoned these swimmers. There wasn't yet a bridge to connect the two land masses, and the Golden Gate stood guard between the relatively protected San Francisco Bay and the wide and wild Pacific Ocean.

On Sept. 20, 1896, 25-year-old Charles Cavill—one of the English-Australian Cavill family of swimmers—left Lime Rock on the Marin side of the Gate and swam toward Fort Point on the San Francisco side. Living up to the family's penchant for swimming dominance, Cavill

finished the swim in 1 hour, 15 minutes. The *San Francisco Call* overhyped his feat by proclaiming he'd swum 7 miles. Nevertheless, Cavill's impressive swim opened the Golden floodgates to future swimmers.

Even though women wouldn't be admitted as members to the Dolphin Club until the mid-1970s, women did swim in the bay from early on, and 15 years after it was first crossed, women succeeded in swimming the Golden Gate. On Aug. 20, 1911, Nita Sheffield and her sister Lyba, Nellie Schmidt, and Terrie Desch launched their swims from Lime Point to the cheers of 5,000 spectators. Nellie Schmidt finished first in 42 minutes, followed by the Sheffield sisters, and Desch exited the race 100 yards before the finish.

But none of these women was the first to swim the Golden Gate; that designation had been claimed some 24 hours earlier by 19-year-old Hazel Bess Laugenour of Oakland, who'd initially agreed to swim on the 20th with the other swimmers but instead decided to scoop them so she could be first. Her 1-hour, 28-minute swim on Aug. 19, 1911, was heralded on the front page of the *San Francisco Call* the next day.

This flurry of successful swims might make it seem like the Golden Gate is an easy crossing, but that's not necessarily true. Although "the distance may appear doable enough," as Dolphin Club member Richard Cooper wrote in a 2013 edition of the "Dolphin Log," the club's quarterly newsletter, "then come the nasty elements: fog, wind, cold water, punishing waves, and powerful currents that can reverse in mid-span. From one year, or one day, to the next, conditions are unpredictable. Each crossing is a new adventure." All the same, interest in doing it grew, and on Sept. 9, 1917, 16 years before construction would even begin on the iconic, red suspension bridge that now spans the Golden Gate, the Dolphin Club sponsored the first group swim. Twenty-four swimmers took part, and Henry W. Kock won in 26:51.

Meanwhile, the man who would eventually come to embody the ethos of the Dolphin Club's annual event was busy learning how to swim. Although he was just 4 years old when the Dolphin Club's annual swim got its start, Joe Bruno, a North Beach-neighborhood native who became a sheet metal worker, would eventually become its most ardent fan and namesake, completing 61 crossings in total. He completed his final crossing at age 81 in 1993 in 41 minutes, good for 57th place among the 62 swimmers who competed that day.

For more than half a century, Bruno was the face of the Dolphin Club's annual outing, and in 1997, he also became the name of it. Upon his death in 2004, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that "several years ago, Mr. Bruno was thrilled when the Dolphin Club named its annual" Golden Gate Swim the Joe Bruno Golden Gate Swim. Joe Illick surpassed Bruno's "oldest finisher" record when he completed the 2016 race in 44:15 just three months before his 82nd birthday.

These days, most swimmers comfortably scoot along the S-shaped, mile-ish-long course in well less than half the time it took the early swimmers to cross. The Dolphin Club's organized event has grown as large as 140 swimmers in years past, and in 2016, winner Catherine Breed led the pack of 83 finishers in a sprightly 19:29. These swimmers were supported by a cast of pilots and helpers nearly as numerous, so it's easy to imagine that with this sort of ongoing dedication to the lengthy history of a great and golden swim, the Joe Bruno Golden Gate Swim stands to last at least another 100 years.—ELAINE K. HOWLEY